

## “ICE WATER, PL — !”<sup>1</sup>

BY FANNIE HURST

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WHEN the two sides of every story are told Henry VIII may establish an alibi or two, Shylock and the public-school system meet over and melt that too, too solid pound of flesh, and Xantippe, herself the sturdier man than Socrates, give ready lie to what is called the shrew in her. Landladies, whole black bombazine generations of them — oh, so long unheard — may rise in one Indictment of the Boarder: the scarred bureau front and match-scratched wall paper; the empty trunk nailed to the floor in security for the unpaid bill; cigarette-burnt sheets and the terror of sudden fire; the silent newcomer in the third floor back hustled out one night in handcuffs; the day-long sobs of the blond girl so suddenly terrified of life-about-to-be and wringing her ringless hands in the fourth-floor hallroom; the smell of escaping gas and the tightly packed keyhole; the unsuspected flutes that lurk in boarders' trunks; towels, that querulous and endless pæan of the lodger; the high cost of liver and dried peaches, of canned corn and round steak!

Tired bombazine procession, wrapped in the greasy odors of years of carpet sweeping and emptying slops, airing the gassy slit of room after the coroner and padding from floor to floor on a mission of towels and towels and towels!

Sometimes climbing from floor to floor, a still warm supply of them looped over one arm, Mrs. Kaufman, who

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wore bombazine, but unspotted and with crisp net frills at the throat, and upon whose soft-looking face the years had written their chirography in invisible ink, would sit suddenly, there in the narrow gloom of her halls, head against the balustrade. Oftener than not the Katz boy from the third floor front would come lickety-clapping down the stairs and past her, jumping the last four steps of each flight.

"Irving, quit your noise in the hall."

"Aw!"

"Ain't you ashamed, a big boy like you, and Mrs. Suss with her neuralgia?"

"Aw!"—the slam of a door clipping off this insolence.

After a while she would resume her climb.

And yet in Mrs. Kaufman's private boarding house in West Eighty-ninth Street, one of a breastwork of brown-stone fronts, lined up stoop for stoop, story for story, and ash can for ash can, there were few enough greasy odors except upon the weekly occasion of Monday's boiled dinner; and, whatever the status of liver and dried peaches, canned corn and round steak, her menus remained static—so static that in the gas-lighted basement dining room and at a remote end of the long, well-surrounded table Mrs. Katz, with her napkin tucked well under her third chin, turned *sotto* from the protruding husband at her right to her left neighbor, shielding her remark with her hand. "Am I right, Mrs. Finshriber? I just said to my husband in the five years we been here she should just give us once a change from Friday night lamb and noodles."

"Say, you should complain yet! With me it's six and a half years day after to-morrow, Easter Day, since I asked myself that question first."

"Even my Irving says to me to-night up in the room, jumping up and down on the hearth like he had four legs—"

"I heard him, Mrs. Katz, on my ceiling like he had eight legs."

“‘Mamma,’ he says, ‘guess why I feel like saying “Baa.”’”

“Saying what?”

“Sheep talk, Mrs. Finshriber. B-a-a, like a sheep goes.”

“Oh!”

“‘Cause I got so many Friday nights’ lamb in me, mamma,’ he said. Quick like a flash that child is.”

Mrs. Finshriber dipped her head and her glance, all her drooping features pulled even further down at their corners. “I ain’t the one to complain, Mrs. Katz, and I always say when you come right down to it, maybe Mrs. Kaufman’s house is as good as the next one, but —”

“I wish, though, Mrs. Finshriber, you would hear what Mrs. Spritz says at her boarding house they get for breakfast: fried —”

“You can imagine, Mrs. Katz, since my poor husband’s death, how much appetite I got left; but I say, Mrs. Katz, just for the principle of the thing, it would not hurt once Mrs. Kaufman should give somebody else besides her own daughter and Vetsburg always the white meat from everything, ain’t it?”

“It’s a shame before the boarders! She knows, Mrs. Finshriber, how my husband likes breast from the chicken. You think once he gets it? No. I always tell him, not till chickens come double-breasted like overcoats can he get it in this house, with Vetsburg such a star boarder.”

“Last night’s chicken, let me tell you, I don’t wish it to a dog! Such a piece of dark meat with gizzard I had to swallow.”

Mrs. Katz adjusted with greater security the expanse of white napkin across her ample bosom. Gold rings and a quarter-inch marriage band flashed in and out among the litter of small tub-shaped dishes surrounding her, and a pouncing fork of a short, sure stab. “Right away my husband gets mad when I say the same thing. ‘When we don’t like it we should move,’ he says.”

“Like moving is so easy, if you got two chairs and a

hair mattress to take with you. But I always say, Mrs. Katz, I don't blame Mrs. Kaufman herself for what goes on; there's *one* good woman if there ever was one!"

"They don't come no better or no better-looking, my husband always says. 'S-ay,' I tell him, 'she can stand her good looks.'"

"It's that big-ideaed daughter is more to blame. Did you see yet her new white spats to-night? Right away the minute they come out she has to have 'em. I'm only surprised she ain't got one of them red hats from Gimp's what is all the fad. *Oser*, if not such ideas, her mother could afford something better as succotash for us for supper."

"It's a shame, let me tell you, that a woman like Mrs. Kaufman can't see for herself such things. God forbid I should ever be so blind to my Irving. I tell you that Ruby has got it more like a queen than a boarding-house keeper's daughter. Spats, yet!"

"Rich girls could be glad to have it always so good."

"I don't say nothing how her mother treats Vetsburg, her oldest boarder, and for what he pays for that second floor front and no lunches she can afford to cater a little; but that such a girl should n't be made to take up a little stenography or help with the housework!"

"S-ay, when that girl even turns a hand, pale like a ghost her mother gets."

"How girls are raised nowadays, even the poor ones!"

"I ain't the one to complain, Mrs. Katz, but just look down there, that red stuff."

"Where?"

"Ain't it cranberry between Ruby and Vetsburg?"

"Yes, yes, and look such a dish of it!"

"Is it right extras should be allowed to be brought on a table like this where fourteen other boarders got to let their mouths water and look at it?"

"You think it don't hurt like a knife! For myself I don't mind, but my Irving! How that child loves 'em,



and he should got to sit at the same table without cranberries."

From the head of the table the flashing implements of carving held in askance for stroke, her lips lifted to a smile and a simulation of interest for display of further carnivorous appetites, Mrs. Kaufman passed her nod from one to the other.

"Miss Arndt, little more? No? Mr. Krakower? Gravy? Mrs. Suss? Mr. Suss? So! Simon? Mr. Schloss? Miss Horowitz? Mr. Vetsburg, let me give you this little tender— No? Then, Ruby, here let mamma give you just a little more—"

"No, no, mamma, please!" She caught at the hovering wrist to spare the descent of the knife.

By one of those rare atavisms by which a poet can be bred of a peasant or peasant be begot of poet, Miss Ruby Kaufman, who was born in Newark, posthumous, to a terrified little parent with a black ribbon at the throat of her gown, had brought with her from no telling where the sultry eyes and tropical-turned skin of spice-kissed winds. The corpuscles of a shah might have been running in the blood of her, yet Simon Kaufman and Simon Kaufman's father before him had sold wool remnants to cap factories on commission.

"Ruby, you don't eat enough to keep a bird alive. Ain't it a shame, Mr. Vetsburg, a girl should be so dainty?"

Mr. Meyer Vetsburg cast a beetling glance down upon Miss Kaufman, there so small beside him, and tinked peremptorily against her plate three times with his fork. "Eat, young lady, like your mamma wants you should, or, by golly, I'll string you up for my watch fob, not, Mrs. Kaufman?"

A smile lay under Mr. Vetsburg's gray-and-black mustache. Gray were his eyes too, and his suit, a comfortable baggy suit with the slouch of the wearer impressed into it, the coat hiking center back, the pocket flaps half in, half out, and the knees sagging out of press.

"That's right, Mr. Vetsburg, you should scold her when she don't eat."

Above the black bombazine basque, so pleasantly relieved at the throat by a V of fresh white net, a wave of color moved up Mrs. Kaufman's face into her architectural coiffure, the very black and very coarse skein of her hair wound into a large loose mound directly atop her head and pierced there with a ball-topped comb of another decade.

"I always say, Mr. Vetsburg, she minds you before she minds anybody else in the world."

"Ma," said Miss Kaufman, close upon that remark, "some succotash, please."

From her vantage down table, Mrs. Katz leaned a bit forward from the line.

"Look, Mrs. Finshriber, how for a woman her age she snaps her black eyes at him. It ain't hard to guess when a woman's got a marriageable daughter, not?"

"You can take it from me she'll get him for her Ruby yet! And take it from me, too, almost any girl I know, much less Ruby Kaufman, could do worse as get Meyer Vetsburg."

"S-say, I wish it to her to get him. For why once in a while should n't a poor girl get a rich man except in books and choruses?"

"Believe me, a girl like Ruby can manage what she wants. Take it from me, she's got it behind her ears."

"I should say so."

"Oser without it she could get in with such a crowd of rich girls like she does. I got it from Mrs. Abrams in the Arline Apartments how every week she plays five hundred with Nathan Shapiro's daughter."

"No! Shapiro and Stein?"

"And yesterday at matinée in she comes with a box of candy and laughing with that Rifkin girl! How she gets in with such swell girls, I don't know, but there ain't a nice Saturday afternoon I don't see that girl walking on Fifth Avenue with just such a crowd of fine-dressed

girls, all with their noses powdered so white and their hats so little and stylish."

"I wouldn't be surprised if her mother don't send her down to Atlantic City over Easter again if Vetsburg goes. Every holiday she has to go lately like it was coming to her."

"Say, between you and me, I don't put it past her it's that Markovitch boy down there she's after. Ray Klein saw 'em on the Boardwalk once together, and she says it's a shame for the people how they sat so close in a rolling chair."

"I wouldn't be surprised she's fresh with the boys, but, believe me, if she gets the uncle she don't take the nephew!"

"Say, a clerk in his own father's hotel like the Markovitches got in Atlantic City ain't no crime."

"Her mother has got bigger thoughts for her than that. For why I guess she thinks her daughter should take the nephew when maybe she can get the uncle herself. Nowadays it ain't nothing no more that girls marry twice their own age."

"I always say I can tell when Leo Markovitch comes down by the way her mother's face gets long and the daughter's gets short."

"Can you blame her? Leo Markovitch, with all his monograms on his shirt sleeves and such black rims on his glasses, ain't the Rosenthal Vetsburg Hosiery Company, not by a long shot! There ain't a store in this town you ask for the No Hole guaranteed stocking, right away they don't show it to you. Just for fun always I ask."

"Cornstarch pudding! Irving, stop making that noise at Mrs. Kaufman! Little boys should be seen and not heard even at cornstarch pudding."

"Gott! Would n't you think, Mrs. Katz, how Mrs. Kaufman knows how I hate desserts that wobble, a little something extra she could give me."

"Oser how she plays favorite, it's a shame. I wish

you look, too, Mrs. Finshriber, how Flora Proskauer carries away from the table her glass milk with slice bread on top. I tell you it don't give tune to a house the boarders should carry away from the table like that. Irving, come and take with you that extra piece cake. Just so much board we pay as Flora Proskauer."

The line about the table broke suddenly, attended with a scraping of chairs and after-dinner chirrupings attended with toothpicks. A blowsy maid strained herself immediately across the strewn table and cloying lamb platter, and turned off two of the three gas jets.

In the yellow gloom, the odors of food permeating it, they filed out and up the dim-lit stairs into dim-lit halls, the line of conversation and short laughter drifting after.

A door slammed. Another. Irving Katz leaped from his third-floor threshold to the front hearth, quaking three layers of chandeliers. From Morris Krakower's fourth floor back the tune of a flute began to wind down the stairs. Out of her just-closed door, Mrs. Finshriber poked a frizzled gray head.

"Ice water, ple-ase, Mrs. Kauf-man."

At the door of the first floor back Mrs. Kaufman paused with her hand on the knob.

"Mamma, let me run and do it."

"Don't you move, Ruby. When Annie goes up to bed is time enough. Won't you come in for a while, Mr. Vetsburg?"

"Don't care if I do."

She opened the door, entering cautiously. "Let me light up, Mrs. Kaufman." He struck a phosphorescent line on the sole of his shoe, turning up three jets.

"You must excuse, Mr. Vetsburg, how this room looks; all day we been sewing for Ruby her new dress."

She caught up a litter of dainty pink frills in the making, clearing a chair for him.

"Sit down, Mr. Vetsburg."

They adjusted themselves around the shower of gas-



light, Miss Kaufman fumbling in her flowered workbag, finally curling her foot up under her, her needle flashing and shirring through one of the pink flounces.

"Ruby, in such a light you should n't strain your eyes."

"All right, ma," stitching placidly on.

"What'll you give me, Ruby, if I tell you whose favorite color is pink?"

"Aw, Vetsy!" she cried, her face like a rose, "*your* color's pink!"

From the depths of an inverted sewing-machine top Mrs. Kaufman fished out another bit of the pink, ruffling it with deft needle.

The flute lifted its plaintive voice, feeling for high C.

Mr. Vetsburg lighted a loosely wrapped cigar and slumped in his chair.

"If anybody," he observed, "should ask right this minute where I'm at, tell 'em for me, Mrs. Kaufman, I'm in the most comfortable chair in the house."

"You should keep it, then, up in your room, Mr. Vetsburg, and not always bring it down again when I get Annie to carry it up to you."

"Say, I don't give up so easy my excuse for dropping in evenings."

"Honest, you — you two children, you ought to have a fence built around you the way you like always to be together."

He sat regarding her, puffing and chewing his live cigar. Suddenly he leaped forward, his hand closing rigidly over hers.

"Mrs. Kaufman!"

"What?"

"Quick, there's a hole in your chin."

"Gott, a — a — what?"

At that he relaxed at his own pleasantry, laughing and shrugging. With small white teeth Miss Kaufman bit off an end of thread.

"Don't let him tease you, ma; he's after your dimple again."

"*Ach, du* — tease, you! Shame! Hole in my chin he scares me with!"

She resumed her work with a smile and a twitching at her lips that she was unable to control. A warm flow of air came in, puffing the lace curtains. A faint odor of departed splendor lay in that room, its high calcimined ceiling with the floral rosette in the center, the tarnished pier glass tilted to reflect a great pair of walnut folding doors which cut off the room where once it had flowed on to join the great length of salon parlor. A folding bed with an inlay of mirror and a collapsible desk arrangement backed up against those folding doors. A divan with a winding back and sleek with horsehair was drawn across a corner, a marble-topped bureau alongside. A bronze clock ticked roundly from the mantel, balanced at either side by a pair of blue glass cornucopias with warts blown into them.

Mrs. Kaufman let her hands drop idly in her lap and her head fall back against the chair. In repose the lines of her mouth turned up, and her throat, where so often the years eat in first, was smooth and even slender above the rather round swell of bosom.

"Tired, mommy?"

"Always around Easter spring fever right away gets hold of me!"

Mr. Vetsburg bit his cigar, slumped deeper, and inserted a thumb in the arm of his waistcoat.

"Why, Mrs. Kaufman, don't you and Ruby come down by Atlantic City with me to-morrow over Easter? Huh? A few more or less don't make no difference to my sister the way they get ready for crowds."

Miss Kaufman shot forward, her face vivid.

"Oh, Vetsy," she cried, and a flush rushed up, completely dyeing her face. His face lit with hers, a sunburst of fine lines radiating from his eyes.

"Eh?"

"Why — why, we — we'd just love it, would n't we, ma? Atlantic City, Easter Day! Ma!"

Mrs. Kaufman sat upright with a whole procession of quick emotions flashing their expressions across her face. They ended in a smile that trembled as she sat regarding the two of them.

"I should say so, yes! I—you and Ruby go, Mr. Vetsburg. Atlantic City, Easter Day, I bet is worth the trip. I—you two go, I should say so, but you don't want an old woman to drag along with you."

"Ma! Just listen to her, Vetsy, ain't she—ain't she just the limit! Half the time when we go in stores together they take us for sisters, and then she—she begins to talk like that to get out of going!"

"Ruby don't understand; but it ain't right, Mr. Vetsburg, I should be away over Saturday and Sunday. On Easter always they expect a little extra, and with Annie's sore ankle, I—I—"

"Oh, mommy, can't you leave this old shebang for only two days just for an Easter Sunday down at Atlantic, where—where everybody goes?"

"You know yourself, Ruby, how always on Annie's Sunday out—"

"Well, what of it? It won't hurt all them old things upstairs that let you wait on them hand and foot all year to go without a few frills for their Easter dinner."

"Ruby!"

"I mean it. The old gossip pots! I just sat and looked at them there at supper just now, and I said to myself, I said, to think they drown kittens and let those poor lumps live!"

"Ruby, ain't you ashamed to talk like that?"

"Sat there and looked at poor old man Katz with his ear all ragged like it had been chewed off, and wondered why he didn't just go down to Brooklyn Bridge for a high jump."

"Ruby, I—"

"If all those big, strapping women, Suss and Finshriber and the whole gang of them, were anything but vegetables, they'd get out and hustle with keeping house, to work

some of their flabbiness off and give us a chance to get somebody in besides a chocolate-eating, novel-reading crowd of useless women who think, mommy, you're a dumbwaiter, chambermaid, lady's maid, and French chef rolled in one! Honest, ma, if you carry that ice water up to Katz to-night on the sly, with that big son of hers to come down and get it, I — I'll go right up and tell her what I think of her if she leaves to-morrow."

"Mr. Vetsburg, you — you must n't listen to her."

"Can't take a day off for a rest at Atlantic City because their old Easter dinner might go down the wrong side. Honest, mamma, to — to think how you're letting a crowd of old, flabby women that ain't fit even to wipe your shoes make a regular servant out of you! Mommy!"

There were tears in Miss Kaufman's voice and actual tears, big and bright, in her eyes, and two spots of color had popped out in her cheeks.

"Ruby, when — when a woman like me makes her living off her boarders, she can't afford to be so particular. You think it's a pleasure I can't slam the door right in Mrs. Katz's face when six times a day now she orders towels and ice water. You think it's a pleasure I got to take sass from such a bad boy like Irving. I tell you, Ruby, it's easy talk from a girl what don't understand. *Ach*, you — you make me ashamed before Mr. Vetsburg you should run down so the people we make our living off of."

Miss Kaufman flashed her vivid face toward Mr. Vetsburg, still low there in his chair. She was trembling. "Vetsy knows! He's the only one in this house does know! He ain't been here with us ten years, ever since we started in this big house, not — not to know he's the only one thinks you're here for anything except impudence and running stairs and standing sass from the bad boys of lazy mothers. You know, don't you, Vetsy?"

"Ruby! Mr. Vetsburg, you — you must excuse —"

From the depths of his chair Mr. Vetsburg's voice came



slow and carefully weighed. "My only complaint, Mrs. Kaufman, with what Ruby has got to say is it ain't strong enough. It maybe ain't none of my business, but always I have told you that for your own good you're too *gemütlich*. No wonder every boarder what you get stays year in and year out till even the biggest kickers pay more board sooner as go. In my business, Mrs. Kaufman, it's the same way right away if I get too easy with —"

"But, Mr. Vetsburg, a poor woman can't afford to be so independent. I got big expenses and big rent; I got a daughter to raise —"

"Mamma, have n't I begged you a hundred times to let me take up stenography and get out and hustle so you can take it easy, have n't I?"

A thick coating of tears sprang to Mrs. Kaufman's eyes and muddled the gaze she turned toward Mr. Vetsburg. "Is it natural, Mr. Vetsburg, a mother should want her only child should have always the best and do always the things she never herself could afford to do? All my life, Mr. Vetsburg, I had always to work. Even when I was five months married to a man what it looked like would some day do big things in the wool business, I was left all of a sudden with nothing but debts and my baby."

"But, mamma —"

"Is it natural, Mr. Vetsburg, I should want to work off my hands my daughter should escape that? Nothing, Mr. Vetsburg, gives me so much pleasure she should go with all those rich girls who like her well enough poor to be friends with her. Always when you take her down to Atlantic City on holidays, where she can meet 'em, it — it —"

"But, mommy, is it any fun for a girl to keep taking trips like that with — with her mother always at home like a servant? What do people think? Every holiday that Vetsy asks me, you — you back out. I — I won't go without you, mommy, and — and I *want* to go, ma, I — I *want* to!"

"My Easter dinner and —"

"You, Mrs. Kaufman, with your Easter dinner! Ruby's right. When your mamma don't go this time, not one step we go by ourselves, ain't it?"

"Not a step."

"But —"

"To-morrow, Mrs. Kaufman, we catch that one-ten train. Twelve o'clock I call in for you. Put ginger in your mamma, Ruby, and we'll open her eyes on the Boardwalk, not?"

"Oh, Vetsy!"

He smiled regarding her.

Tears had fallen and dried on Mrs. Kaufman's cheeks; she wavered between a hysteria of tears and laughter.

"I — children —" She succumbed to tears, daubing her eyes shamefacedly.

He rose kindly. "Say, when such a little thing can upset her it's high time she took for herself a little rest. If she backs out, we string her up by the thumbs, not, Ruby?"

"We're going, ma. Going! You'll love the Markovitch's' hotel, ma dearie, right near the Boardwalk, and the grandest glassed-in porch and — and chairs, and — and nooks and things. Ain't they, Vetsy?"

"Yes, you little Ruby, you," he said, regarding her with warm, insinuating eyes, even crinkling an eyelid in a wink.

She did not return the glance, but caught her cheeks in the vise of her hands as if to stem the too-quick flush. "Now you — you quit!" she cried, flashing her back upon him in quick pink confusion.

"She gets mad yet," he said, his shoulders rising and falling in silent laughter.

"Don't!"

"Well," he said, clicking the door softly after him, "good night and sleep tight."

"'Night, Vetsy."

Upon the click of that door Mrs. Kaufman leaned

softly forward in her chair, speaking through a scratch in her throat. "Ruby!"

With her flush still high, Miss Kaufman danced over toward her parent, then as suddenly ebbed in spirit, the color going. "Why, mommy, what — what you crying for, dearie? Why, there's nothing to cry for, dearie, that we're going off on a toot to-morrow. Honest, dearie, like Vetsy says, you're all nerves. I bet from the way Suss hollered at you to-day about her extra milk you're upset yet. Wouldn't I give her a piece of my mind, though! Here, move your chair, mommy, and let me pull down the bed."

"I — I'm all right, baby. Only I just tell you it's enough to make anybody cry we should have a friend like we got in Vetsburg. I — I tell you, baby, they just don't come no better than him. Not, baby? Don't be ashamed to say so to mamma."

"I ain't, mamma! And, honest, his — his whole family is just that way. Sweetlike and generous. Wait till you see the way his sister and brother-in-law will treat us at the hotel to-morrow. And — and Leo too."

"I always say the day what Meyer Vetsburg, when he was only a clerk in the firm, answered my furnished-room advertisement was the luckiest day in my life."

"You ought to heard, ma; I was teasing him the other day, telling him that he ought to live at the Savoy now that he's a two-thirds member of the firm."

"Ruby!"

"I was only teasing, ma. You just ought to seen his face. Any day he'd leave us!"

Mrs. Kaufman placed a warm, insinuating arm around her daughter's slim waist, drawing her around the chair side and to her. "There's only one way, baby, Meyer Vetsburg can ever leave me and make me happy when he leaves."

"Ma, what you mean?"

"You know, baby, without mamma coming right out in words."

"Ma, honest I don't. What?"

"You see it coming just like I do. Don't fool mamma, baby."

The slender lines of Miss Kaufman's waist stiffened, and she half slipped from the embrace.

"Now, now, baby, is it wrong a mother should talk to her own baby about what is closest in both their hearts?"

"I — I, mamma, I — I don't know!"

"How he's here in this room every night lately, Ruby, since you — you're a young lady. How right away he follows us upstairs. How lately he invited you every month down at Atlantic City. Baby, you ain't blind, are you?"

"Why, mamma — why, mamma, what is Meyer Vetsburg to — to me? Why, he — he's got gray hair, ma; he — he's getting bald. Why, he — he don't know I'm on earth. He — he's —"

"You mean, baby, he don't know anybody else is on earth. What's, nowadays, baby, a man forty? Why — why, ain't mamma forty-one, baby, and did n't you just say yourself for sisters they take us?"

"I know, ma, but he — he — Why, he's got an accent, ma, just like old man Katz and — and all of 'em. He says 'too-sand' for thousand. He —"

"Baby, ain't you ashamed like it makes any difference how a good man talks?" She reached out, drawing her daughter by the wrists down into her lap. "You're a bad little flirt, baby you, what pretends she don't know what a blind man can see."

Miss Kaufman's eyes widened, darkened, and she tugged for the freedom of her wrists. "Ma, quit scaring me!"

"Scaring you! That such a rising man like Vetsburg, with a business he worked himself into president from clerk looks every day more like he's falling in love with you, should scare you!"

"Ma, not — not him!"

In reply she fell to stroking the smooth black plaits



wound coronet fashion about Miss Kaufman's small head. Large, hot tears sprang to her eyes, "Baby, when you talk like that it's you that scares mamma!"

"He — he —"

"Why, you think, Ruby, I been making out of myself a servant like you call it all these years except for your future? For myself a smaller house without such a show and maybe five or six roomers without meals, you think ain't easier as this big barn? For what, baby, you think I always want you should have extravagances maybe I can't afford and should keep up with the fine girls what you meet down by Atlantic City if it ain't that a man like Meyer Vetsburg can be proud to choose you from the best?"

"Mamma, mamma!"

"Don't think, Ruby, when the day comes what I can give up this white-elephant house it won't be a happy one for me. Every night when I hear from upstairs how Mrs. Katz and all of them hollers down 'towels' and 'ice water' to me like I — I was their slave, you don't think, baby, I will be happiest woman in this world the day what I can slam the door, bang, right on the words."

"Mamma, mamma, and you pretending all these years you did n't mind!"

"I don't, baby. Not one minute while I got a future to look forward to with you. For myself, baby, you think I ask anything except my little girl's happiness? Anyways, when happiness come to you with a man like Meyer Vetsburg, don't — don't it come to me, too, baby?"

"Please, I —"

"That's what my little girl can do for mamma, better as stenography. Set herself down well. That's why, since we got on the subject, baby, I — I hold off signing up the new lease with every day Shulif fussing so. Maybe, baby, I — well, just maybe, eh, baby?"

For answer a torrent of tears so sudden that they came in an avalanche burst from Miss Kaufman, and she

crumpled forward face in hands and red rushing up the back of her neck and over her ears.

"Ruby!"

"No, no, ma! No, no!"

"Baby, the dream what I've dreamed five years for you!"

"No, no, no!"

She fell back regarding her.

"Why, Ruby. Why, Ruby, girl!"

"It ain't fair. You must n't!"

"Must n't?"

"Must n't! Must n't!" Her voice had slipped up now and away from her.

"Why, baby, it's natural at first maybe a girl should be so scared. Maybe I should n't have talked so soon except how it's getting every day plainer, these trips to Atlantic City and——"

"Mamma, mamma, you're killing me." She fell back against her parent's shoulder, her face frankly distorted.

A second, staring there into space, Mrs. Kaufman sat with her arm still entwining the slender but lax form. "Ruby, is — is it something you ain't telling mamma?"

"Oh, mommy, mommy!"

"Is there?"

"I — I don't know."

"Ruby, should you be afraid to talk to mamma, who don't want nothing but her child's happiness?"

"You know, mommy. You know!"

"Know what, baby?"

"I — er ——"

"Is there somebody else you got on your mind, baby?"

"You know, mommy."

"Tell mamma, baby. It ain't a — a crime if you got maybe somebody else on your mind."

"I can't say it, mommy. It — it would n't be — be nice."

"Nice?"

"He — he — We ain't even sure yet."

"He?"

"Not — yet."

"Who?"

"You know."

"So help me, I don't."

"Mommy, don't make me say it. Maybe if — when his uncle Meyer takes him in the business, we —"

"Baby, not Leo?"

"Oh, mommy, mommy." And she buried her hot, revealing face into the fresh net V.

"Why — why, baby, a — a *boy* like that!"

"Twenty-three, mamma, ain't a boy!"

"But, Ruby, just a clerk in his father's hotel, and two older brothers already in it. A — a boy that ain't got a start yet."

"That's just it, ma. We — we're waiting! Waiting before we talk even — even much to each other yet. Maybe — maybe his uncle Meyer is going to take him in the business, but it ain't sure yet. We —"

"A little yellow-haired boy like him that — that can't support you, baby, unless you live right there in his mother's and father's hotel away — away from me!"

"Ma!"

"Ruby, a smart girl like you. A little snip what don't make salt yet when you can have the uncle hisself!"

"I can't help it, ma! If — if — the first time Vetsy took me down to — to the shore, if — if Leo had been a king or a — or just what he is, it would n't make no difference. I — I can't help my — my feelings, ma. I can't!"

A large furrow formed between Mrs. Kaufman's eyes, darkening her brow.

"You would n't, Ruby," she said, clutching her.

"Oh, mommy, mommy, when a — a girl can't help a thing!"

"He ain't good enough for you, baby."

"He's ten times too good that — that's all you know

about it. Mommy, please! I—I just can't help it, dearie. It's just like when I—I saw him a—a clock began to tick inside of me. I—”

“Oh, my God,” said Mrs. Kaufman, drawing her hand across her brow.

“His uncle Meyer, ma's been hinting all along he—he's going to give Leo his start and take him in the business. That's why we—we're waiting without saying much, till it looks more like—like we can all be together, ma.”

“All my dreams! My dreams I could give up the house! My baby with a well-to-do husband maybe on Riverside Drive. A servant for herself, so I could pass maybe Mrs. Suss and Mrs. Katz by on the street. Ruby, you—you would n't, Ruby. After how I've built for you!”

“Oh, mamma, mamma, mamma!”

“If you ain't got ambitions for yourself, Ruby, think once of me and this long dream I been dreaming for—us.”

“Yes, ma. Yes.”

“Gott im Himmel, Ruby, I always thought, and how he must have thought it, too, when you was so glad for Atlantic City, it—it was for Vetsburg you liked his folks. How could I know it was—”

“I never thought, mommy. Why—why Vetsy, he's just like a relation or something.”

“I tell you, baby, it's just an idea you got in your head.”

“No, no, mamma. No. No.”

Suddenly Mrs. Kaufman threw up her hands, clasping them tight against her eyes, pressing them in frenzy. “Oh, my God,” she cried, “all for nothing!” and fell to moaning through her laced fingers. “All for nothing! Years. Years. Years.”

“Mommy, darling!”

“Oh—don't, don't! Just let me be. Let me be. Oh, my God! My God!”



"Mommy, please, mommy! I did n't mean it. I did n't mean it, mommy, darling."

"I can't go on all the years, Ruby. I'm tired. Tired, girl."

"Of course you can't, darling. We—I don't want you to. Shh-h-h!"

"It's only you and my hopes in you that kept me going all these years. The hope that with some day a good man to provide for you, I could find a rest maybe."

"Yes, yes."

"Every time what I think of that long envelope laying there on that desk with its lease waiting to be signed tomorrow, I—I could squeeze my eyes shut so tight, and wish I did n't never have to open them again on this—this house and this drudgery. If you marry wrong, baby, I'm caught. Caught in this house like a rat in a trap."

"No, no, mommy. Leo, he—his uncle—"

"Don't make me sign that new lease, Ruby. Shulif hounds me every day now. Any day I expect he says is my last. Don't make me saddle another five years with the house. He's only a boy, baby, and years it will take, and—I'm tired, baby. Tired! Tired!" She lay back with her face suddenly held in rigid lines and her neck ribbed with cords.

At sight of her so prostrate there, Ruby Kaufman grasped the cold face in her ardent young hands, pressing her lips to the streaming eyes.

"Mommy, I did n't mean it. I did n't! I—we're just kids, flirting a little, Leo and me. I did n't mean it, mommy!"

"You did n't mean it, Ruby, did you? Tell mamma you did n't."

"I did n't, ma. Cross my heart. It's only I—I kinda had him in my head. That's all, dearie. That's all!"

"He can't provide, baby."

"Ehh-h-h, ma. Try to get calm, and maybe then—then things can come like you want 'em. Shh-h-h, dearie. I did n't mean it. 'Course Leo's only a kid. I—

we — Mommy dear, don't. You're killing me. I did n't mean it. I did n't."

"Sure, baby! Sure?"

"Sure."

"Mamma's girl," sobbed Mrs. Kaufman, scooping the small form to her bosom and relaxing. "Mamma's own girl that minds."

They fell quiet, cheek to cheek, staring ahead into the gaslit quiet, the clock ticking into it.

The tears had dried on Mrs. Kaufman's cheeks, only her throat continuing to throb and her hand at regular intervals patting the young shoulder pressed to her. It was as if her heart lay suddenly very still in her breast.

"Mamma's own girl that minds."

"It — it's late, ma. Let me pull down the bed."

"You ain't mad at mamma, baby? It's for your own good as much as mine. It is unnatural a mother should want to see her —"

"No, no, mamma. Move, dearie; let me pull down the bed. There you are. Now!"

With a wrench Mrs. Kaufman threw off her recurring inclination to tears, moving casually through the processes of their retirement.

"To-morrow, baby, I tighten the buttons on them new spats. How pretty they look."

"Yes, dearie."

"I told Mrs. Katz to-day right out her Irving can't bring any more his bicycle through my front hall. Was n't I right?"

"Of course you were, ma."

"Miss Flora looked right nice in that pink waist to-night, not? Four-eighty-nine only, at Gimp's sale."

"She's too fat for pink."

"You get in bed first, baby, and let mamma turn out the lights."

"No, no, mamma; you."

In her white slip of a nightdress, her coronet braids unwound and falling down each shoulder, even her slight-

ness had waned. She was like Juliet who at fourteen had eyes of maid and martyr.

They crept into bed, grateful for darkness.

The flute had died out, leaving a silence that was plaintive.

"You all right, baby?"

"Yes, ma." And she snuggled down into the curve of her mother's arm.

"Are you, mommy?"

"Yes, baby."

"Go to sleep then."

"Good night, baby."

"Good night, mommy."

Silence.

Lying there with her face upturned and her eyes closed, a stream of quiet tears found their way from under Miss Kaufman's closed lids, running down and toward her ears like spectacle frames.

An hour ticked past, and two damp pools had formed on her pillow.

"Asleep yet, baby?"

"Almost, ma."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"You — you ain't mad at mamma?"

"'Course not, dearie."

"I — thought it sounded like you was crying."

"Why, mommy, 'course not! Turn over now and go to sleep."

Another hour, and suddenly Mrs. Kaufman shot out her arm from the coverlet, jerking back the sheet and feeling for her daughter's dewy, upturned face where the tears were slashing down it.

"Baby!"

"Mommy, you — you must n't!"

"Oh, my darling, like I did n't suspicion it!"

"It's only —"

"You got, Ruby, the meanest mamma in the world.

But you think, darling, I got one minute's happiness like this?"

"I'm all right, mommy, only —"

"I been laying here half the night, Ruby, thinking how I'm a bad mother what thinks only of her own —"

"No, no, mommy. Turn over and go to sl —"

"My daughter falls in love with a fine, upright young man like Leo Markovitch, and I ain't satisfied yet! Suppose maybe for two or three years you ain't so much on your feet. Suppose even his uncle Meyer don't take him in. Don't any young man got to get his start slow?"

"Mommy!"

"Because I got for her my own ideas, my daughter should n't have in life the man she wants!"

"But, mommy, if —"

"You think for one minute, Ruby, after all these years without this house on my hands and my boarders and their kicks, a woman like me would be satisfied! Why, the more, baby, I think of such a thing, the more I see it for myself. What you think, Ruby, I do all day without steps to run and my gedinks with housekeeping and marketing after eighteen years of it? At first, Ruby, ain't it natural it should come like a shock that you and that rascal Leo got all of a sudden so — so thick? I — it ain't no more, baby, I — I feel fine about it."

"Oh, mommy, if — if I thought you did!"

"I do. Why not? A fine young man what my girl is in love with. Every mother should have it so."

"Mommy, you mean it?"

"I tell you I feel fine. You don't need to feel bad or cry another minute. I can tell you I feel happy. Tomorrow at Atlantic City such a rascal don't tell me for himself. I — I ask him right out!"

"Ma."

"For why yet he should wait till he's got better prospects, so his mother-in-law can hang on? I guess not!"

"Mommy, darling. If you only truly feel like that about it. Why, you can keep putting off the lease, ma,



if it's only for six months and then we — we'll all be to —"

"Of course, baby. Mamma knows. Of course!"

"He — I just can't begin to tell you, ma, the kind of a fellow Leo is till you know him better, mommy dear."

"Always Vetsburg says he's a wideawake one!"

"That's just what he is, ma. He's just a prince if — if there ever was one. One little prince of a fellow." She fell to crying softly, easy tears that flowed freely.

"I — I can tell you, baby, I'm happy as you."

"Mommy, dear, kiss me."

They talked, huddled arm in arm, until dawn flowed in at the window and dirty roofs began to show against a clean sky. Footsteps began to clatter through the asphalt court and there came the rattle of milk cans.

"I wonder if Annie left out the note for Mrs. Suss's extra milk!"

"Don't get up, dearie; it's only five."

"Right away, baby, with extra towels I must run up to Miss Flora's room. That six o'clock train for Trenton she gets."

"Ma, dear, let me go."

"Lay right where you are! I guess you want you should look all worn out when a young man what I know walks down to meet our train at Atlantic City this afternoon, eh?"

"Oh, mommy, mommy." And Ruby lay back against the luxury of pillows.

At eleven the morning rose to its climax — the butcher, the baker, and every sort of maker hustling in and out the basement way; the sweeping of upstairs halls; windows flung open and lace curtains looped high; the smell of spring pouring in even from asphalt; sounds of scrubbing from various stoops; shouts of drivers from a narrow street wedged with its Saturday morning blockade of delivery wagons, and a crosstown line of motor cars, tops back, and nosing for the speedway of upper Broadway. A homely bouquet of odors rose from the

basement kitchen, drifting up through the halls, the smell of mutton bubbling as it stewed.

After a morning of upstairs and downstairs and in and out of chambers, Mrs. Kaufman, enveloped in a long-sleeved apron still angular with starch, hung up the telephone receiver in the hall just beneath the staircase and entered her bedroom, sitting down rather heavily beside the open shelf of her desk. A long envelope lay uppermost on that desk, and she took it up slowly, blinking her eyes shut and holding them squeezed tight as if she would press back a vision, even then a tear oozing through. She blinked it back, but her mouth was wry with the taste of tears.

A slatternly maid poked her head in through the open door. “Mrs. Katz broke ’er mug!”

“Take the one off Mr. Krakow’s washstand and give it to her, Tillie.”

She was crying now frankly, and when the door swung closed, even though it swung back again on its insufficient hinge, she let her head fall forward into the pillow of her arms, the curve of her back rising and falling.

But after a while the greengrocer came on his monthly mission, in his white apron and shirt sleeves, and she compared stubs with him from a file on her desk and balanced her account with careful squinted glance and a keen eye for an overcharge on a cut of breakfast bacon.

On the very heels of him, so that they met and danced to pass one another in the doorway, Mr. Vetsburg entered with an overcoat flung across his right arm and his left sagging to a small black traveling bag.

“Well,” he said, standing in the frame of the open door, his derby well back on his head and regarding her there beside the small desk, “is this what you call ready at twelve?”

She rose and moved forward in her crackly starched apron. “I—please, Mr. Vetsburg, it ain’t right I know—”

“You don’t mean you’re not going!” he exclaimed, the lifted quality immediately dropping from his voice.

"You — you got to excuse me again, Mr. Vetsburg. It ain't no use I should try to get away on Saturdays, much less Easter Saturday."

"Well, of all things!"

"Right away the last minute, Mr. Vetsburg, right one things after another!"

He let his bag slip to the floor.

"Maybe, Mrs. Kaufman," he said, "it ain't none of my business, but ain't it a shame a good business woman like you should let herself always be tied down to such a house like she was married to it? Ain't it?"

"But —"

"Can't get away on Saturdays, just like it ain't the same any other day in the week, I ask you! Saturday you blame it on yet!"

She lifted the apron from her hem, her voice hurrying. "You can see for yourself, Mr. Vetsburg, how in my brown silk all ready I was. Even — even Ruby don't know yet I don't go. Down by Gimp's I sent her she should buy herself one of them red straw hats is the fad with the girls now. She meets us down by the station."

"That's a fine come-off, ain't it, to disappoint —"

"At the last minute, Mr. Vetsburg, how things can happen. Out of a clear sky Mrs. Finshriber has to-morrow for Easter dinner that skin doctor, Abrams, and his wife she's so particular about. And Annie with her sore ankle and —"

"A little shyster doctor like Abrams with his advertisements all over the newspapers should sponge off you and your holiday. By golly, Mrs. Kaufman, just like Ruby says, how you let a whole household of old hens rule this roost it's a shame!"

"When you go down to the station, Mr. Vetsburg, so right away she ain't so disappointed I don't come, tell her maybe to-morrow I —"

"I don't tell her nothing!" broke in Mr. Vetsburg and moved toward her with considerable strengthening of tone. "Mrs. Kaufman, I ask you, you think it right you

should go back like this on Ruby and me, just when we want most you should —”

At that she quickened and fluttered. “Ruby and you! Ach, it’s a old saying, Mr. Vetsburg, like the twig is bent so the tree grows. That child won’t be so surprised her mother changes her mind. Just so changeable as her mother, and more, is Ruby herself. With that girl, Mr. Vetsburg, it’s — it’s hard to know what she does one minute from the next. I always say no man — nobody can ever count on a little harum-scarum like — like she is.”

He took up her hat, a small turban of breast feathers, laid out on the table beside him, and advanced with it clumsily enough. “Come,” he said, “please now, Mrs. Kaufman. Please.”

“I —”

“I — I got plans made for us to-morrow down by the shore that’s — that’s just fine! Come now, Mrs. Kaufman.”

“Please, Mr. Vetsburg, don’t force. I — I can’t! I always say nobody can count on such a little harum-scarum as —”

“You mean to tell me, Mrs. Kaufman, that just because a little shyster doctor —”

Her hand closed over the long envelope again, crunching it. “No, no, that — that ain’t all, Mr. Vetsburg. Only I don’t want you should tell Ruby, you promise me? How that child worries over little things. Shulif from the agency called up just now. He don’t give me one more minute as two this afternoon I — I should sign. How I been putting them off so many weeks with this lease, it’s a shame. Always you know how in the back of my head I’ve had it to take maybe a smaller place when this lease was done, but, like I say, talk is cheap and moving ain’t so easy done, ain’t it? If he puts in new plumbing in pantry and new hinges on the doors and papers my second floor and Mrs. Suss’s alcove, like I said last night, after all I could do worse as stay here another five year, ain’t it, Mr. Vetsburg?”



"I —"

"A house what keeps filled so easy and such a location with the subway less as two blocks. I — So you see, Mr. Vetsburg, if I don't want I come back and find my house on the market, maybe rented over my head, I got to stay home for Shulif when he comes to-day."

A rush of dark blood had surged up into Mr. Vetsburg's face, and he twiddled his hat, his dry fingers moving around inside the brim.

"Mrs. Kaufman," he cried, "Mrs. Kaufman, sometimes when for years a man don't speak out his mind, sometimes he busts all of a sudden right out. I — oh — e-e-e!" And, immediately and thickly inarticulate, he made a tremendous feint at clearing his throat, tossed up his hat and caught it, and rolled his eyes.

"Mr. Vetsburg?"

"A man, Mrs. Kaufman, can bust!"

"Bust?"

He was still violently dark but swallowing with less labor. "Yes, from holding in. Mrs. Kaufman, should a woman like you — the finest woman in the world, and I can prove it — a woman, Mrs. Kaufman, who in her heart and my heart and — Should such a woman not come to Atlantic City when I got everything fixed like a stage set!"

She threw out an arm that was visibly trembling. "Mr. Vetsburg, for God's sake, ain't I just told you how that she — harum-scarum — she —"

"Will you, Mrs. Kaufman, come or won't you? Will you, I ask you, or won't you?" He threw a gesture now with mastery, one arm before and one behind.

"I — I can't, Mr. —"

"All right, then, I — I bust out now. To-day can be as good as to-morrow! Not with my say in a thousand years, Mrs. Kaufman, you sign that lease! I ain't a young man any more with fine speeches, Mrs. Kaufman, but not in a thousand years you sign that lease."

"Mr. Vetsburg, Ruby, I —"

“If anybody’s got a lease on you, Mrs. Kaufman, I — I want it! I want it! That’s the kind of a lease would suit me. To be leased to you for always, the rest of your life!”

She could not follow him down the vista of fancy, but stood interrogating him with her heartbeats at her throat. “Mr. Vetsburg, if he puts on the doors and hinges and new plumbing in —”

“I’m a plain man, Mrs. Kaufman, without much to offer a woman what can give out her heart’s blood like it was so much water. But all these years I been waiting, Mrs. Kaufman, to bust out, until — till things got riper. I know with a woman like you, whose own happiness always is last, that first your girl must be fixed —”

“She’s a young girl, Mr. Vetsburg, you — you must n’t depend — If I had my say —”

“He’s a fine fellow, Mrs. Kaufman. With his uncle to help ’em, they got, let me tell you, a better start as most young ones!”

She rose, holding on to the desk.

“I — I —” she said. “What?”

“Lena,” he uttered very softly.

“Lena, Mr. Vetsburg?”

“It ain’t been easy, Lenie, these years while she was only growing up, to keep off my lips that name. A name just like a leaf off a rose. Lena!” he reiterated and advanced.

Comprehension came quietly and dawning like a morning.

“I — I, Mr. Vetsburg, you must excuse me,” she said and sat down suddenly.

He crossed to the little desk and bent low over the back of her chair with his hand, not on her shoulder, but at the knob of her chair. His voice had a swift rehearsed quality.

“Maybe to-morrow, if you did n’t back out, it would sound finer by the ocean, Lenie, but it don’t need the

ocean a man should tell a woman when she's the first and the finest woman in the world. Does it, Lenie?"

"I — I thought Ruby. She —"

"He's a good boy, Leo is, Lenie. A good boy what can be good to a woman like his father before him. Good enough even for a fine girl like our Ruby, Lenie — *our* Ruby!"

"*Gott im Himmel*, then you —"

"Wide-awake, too. With a start like I can give him in my business, you ain't got to worry Ruby ain't fixed herself with the man what she chooses. To-morrow at Atlantic City all fixed I had it I should tell —"

"You!" she said, turning around in her chair to face him, "you — all along you been fixing —"

He turned sheepish. "Ain't it fair, Lenie, in love and war and business a man has got to scheme for what he wants out of life? Long enough it took she should grow up. I knew all along once those two, each so full of life and gedinks, got together it was natural what should happen. Mrs. Kaufman! Lenie! Lenie!"

From two flights up, in through the open door and well above the harsh sound of scrubbing, a voice curled down through the hallways and in. "Mrs. Kaufman, ice water — ple-ase!"

"Lenie," he said, his singing, tingling fingers closing over her wrist.

"Mrs. Kauf-man, ice water, pl — — !"

With her free arm she reached and slammed the door, let her cheek lie to the back of his hand, and closed her eyes.